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TAGS: [LA](#) [PINR](#) [PREF](#) [PREL](#)  
SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR DISCUSSES HMONG ISSUES WITH MFA  
SPOKESPERSON

REF: A. BANGKOK 0685

- [1](#)B. 07 VIENTIANE 0364
- [1](#)C. 07 VIENTIANE 0288
- [1](#)D. 07 VIENTIANE 0110
- [1](#)E. 06 VIENTIANE 1205

Classified By: Ambassador Ravic R. Huso for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (C) SUMMARY: Lao MFA Pres Department Director General Yong Chanthalangsy told the Ambassador that the 11 Hmong "voluntarily" returned from Thailand at the end of February are being held for "screening" preparatory to being allowed to return home or being resettled domestically. All are fine, and none are being mistreated. Of the 7800 Hmong in Petchabun Thailand, perhaps 1500 would need domestic resettlement assistance according to Yong. Rejecting third country resettlement for members of this group directly from Petchabun, Yong suggested the United States submit a list of members of this group of interest to the U.S., and they could be allowed to emigrate after their return to Laos. End summary.

The 11 Returnees  
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[1](#)2. (C) Lao MFA spokesman and government point man on Hmong issues Yong Chanthalangsy discussed at length several intersecting Hmong issues with the Ambassador on March 6. Concerning the whereabouts of the 11 Lao nationals of Hmong descent who were returned to Laos by Thai authorities on February 27 (ref A), Yong stated that all 11 were in Paksan district of Bolikhamsai province where they were being "screened" (sic). (Note: Yong's statement is consistent with information provided by a U.S. citizen of Hmong origin who informed Embassy Bangkok that she had been in phone contact with at least one of the returnees.)

[1](#)3. (C) Yong claimed that the Thai authorities had not provided any advance information regarding the identities of the 11 returnees or their places of origin. For that reason, Yong said, the Lao authorities needed to hold the returnees in Paksan until officials had sufficient information to determine who among the 11 could return directly to their villages or communities and who would need assistance for resettlement. Yong was adamant that all were fine and would not face any mistreatment. He tacitly acknowledged that they were in custody, admitting that, until the authorities had

decided where they would be permitted to go, they could not leave the facility in Paksan ) a facility that he said was not a jail but would continue to be used as a transit point for other returnees.

14. (C) The Ambassador pressed Yong to arrange immediately for independent actors ) for example, diplomatic representatives or the foreign media ) to have access to members of the group to verify their condition. Yong agreed that this should happen and claimed that, once the authorities had determined the final destinations for the 11, he would then be in a position to arrange for a press encounter or similar event to make public their condition. (Note: DG Yong has organized tours for the Vientiane-based diplomatic corps in the past to meet small numbers of "economic migrant" Hmong returned from Thailand including one family in February 2007 (ref D) and three heads of family in March 2007 (ref C); he also took an EU delegation to see one older resettlement village in early March 2008.)

#### The Petchabun Group

15. (C) Concerning the 7,800 Hmong from Laos being held in a camp in Petchabun province, Thailand, Yong told the Ambassador that only an estimated 1,500 would need to be resettled after their return to Laos because they were either destitute or had been slash-and-burn farmers. The remainder, he added, appeared to have the family ties and sufficient resources to allow them to return directly to their former communities. For that reason, the Lao government, Yong added, was not particularly concerned as to whether the international community assisted or not with the resettlement of these or future returnees. The Lao had the necessary funds and land available to deal with the 1,500 who would

need assistance. In fact, Yong claimed, the new resettlement location at Phalak north of Vientiane Municipality was ready to absorb about 500 men, women, and children and could easily expand to double that size. Yong - aware that the Ambassador had requested the opportunity to visit this village and other Hmong resettlement areas ) promised to organize a visit in the near future.

16. (C) Yong also launched the same trial balloon that he used with the Thai MFA (ref A), suggesting that the Lao would not object ) and would even facilitate ) the &third country8 resettlement of returnees from Petchabun after they had returned to Laos. (Note: DG Yong and Vice Foreign Minister Hiem Phommachanh had raised this post-return third country resettlement possibility last year for the 155 Hmong being held in Nong Khai, Thailand -- see ref B) Yong asked whether the United States might consider submitting a list of persons whom we have determined we would wish to bring to the U.S. Laos, he said, was working with France to facilitate the departure of 18 individuals for &family reunification.8 (Note: The French have made such a request.)

17. (C) The Ambassador asked whether Yong was implying that the Lao would accept a refugee resettlement program directly from Laos. Yong replied that the Lao government would never accept the principle that a Lao national had a well-founded fear of persecution in his/her own country, and thus a formal refugee resettlement programs was out of the question. What he was proposing, Yong went on, was a tacit understanding that the U.S. had a special interest in certain individuals, but their movement to the U.S. would have to be as immigrants. The Ambassador said the U.S. government would not agree to deliberately conceal the true nature of the status of anyone coming to the U.S. from the Congress or the American people. However, that does not rule out the possibility the U.S. may in the future decide to approach the Lao, as did the French, on specific cases.

18. (C) Ambassador pressed Yong to consider resettlement of &persons of concern8 directly from Thailand. Yong said the Lao government was strongly opposed because of the &pull factor8 associated with third country resettlement from

Thailand. He cited the Wat Tham Krabok direct resettlement program implemented a few years ago as clear evidence that there is a demonstrated pull factor at work. Also, the Lao government accepted the principle that Lao nationals illegally in Thailand should return to Laos. Yong also affirmed the principle that all should return voluntarily and that, from the Lao perspective, there was no deadline or target date for completing the return of the Petchabun camp population. The Ambassador warned Yong that this approach was not workable and strongly encouraged Yong to try to modify the Lao position to allow for the possibility in certain cases of direct resettlement. This was particularly pressing in the case of the Hmong in detention in Nong Khai who had already been identified as Persons of Concern (POCs) by the UNHCR.

#### Insurgents

¶9. (C) On the issue of Hmong insurgents - or groups that continued to resist Lao government control - Yong estimated that there are fewer than a thousand remaining, including women and children. Yong stated that in 2004 the government adopted a "comprehensive" policy for dealing with the remaining insurgents. The military, which had been in charge prior to that, had made a "mess" of the situation, he said. The current government policy is based on "clemency" and full reintegration into society. Yong added that the government now recognized that the problem was essentially "political" and claimed that this new approach was working. (Note: the Embassy has estimated as many as 2000 Hmong surrendered in 2005-2006 (ref E).)

¶10. (C) Asked if there were problems communicating with these groups, Yong said, "no." The means of communication is primarily through messengers. Yong said that there is risk in this and that several from the government side had been killed. More recently, more Hmong group leaders have access to cellular phones. The Ambassador mentioned that there were reports from U.S. Hmong activists that some of the

insurgent leaders were interested in reintegrating but did not know whom to contact to arrange a safe surrender. Yong replied that he has been and would continue to be a point of contact.

#### Comment

¶11. (C) Yong is emerging as a key player on Hmong issues. His influence is clear in the decision to allow press coverage of the return of the 11 Hmong to Vientiane and arranging several visits by diplomats to Hmong resettlement areas. Whether his influence extends to policy is not yet clear. He expressed evident irritation that the Thai approach to dealing with the Hmong returnee issue primarily through the Border Committee process had strengthened the Lao military's role.

#### Bio Note

¶12. (SBU) Although Yong is currently assigned to the MFA as its press handler, he is not a career diplomat. He studied in France 1973-1977 and received a Diploma of Journalism from the Centre de Formation des Journalistes de Paris in 1977. He returned to Laos in 1977 and worked for more than 20 years for the state news agency -- with one year off for training at the Indian Institute of Mass Communication 1980-1981. Yong then worked directly for the ASEAN secretariat in Jakarta 1998-2002 dealing with ASEAN and ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) disaster relief issues. Yong is smart, self-confident, and speaks polished French and English.

Huso